

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
STATEMENT of
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RANKING MEMBER of the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
"FOCUSED ISSUES ON DIGNIFIED BURIALS:
A NATIONAL CEMETERY UPDATE"
OCTOBER 30, 2013

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding a hearing on this important topic. I also want to thank the witnesses for their attendance this morning.

It is my belief that the option of a burial in a VA national cemetery, in one's home state, is a solemn obligation our government should fulfill. The National Cemetery Administration has grown dramatically since its creation in 1862 when 14 cemeteries were established to serve as a permanent resting place for those killed during the Civil War.

On July 17 of that year, Congress enacted legislation that authorized the President to purchase "cemetery grounds" to be used as national cemeteries.

In 1873, all honorably discharged veterans became eligible for burial.

Since then, the NCA has expanded its geographic diversity to better serve veterans across the country and currently operates 131 national cemeteries in the United States. New York has seven active national cemeteries. Three other states have six each, and Puerto Rico has two.

While access has grown significantly, there is still a very large population of veterans who do not have the option of being buried in one of our nation's prestigious national cemeteries in the state they call home.

The state with the largest veterans population without a national cemetery happens to be Nevada, home to a growing population of over 301,000 veterans. I represent Las Vegas, where 170,000 veterans reside.

In total, 11 states with a combined veteran population of 1.8 million are not served by a national cemetery. More than half are western states - Nevada, Idaho, Utah, Montana, Wyoming, and North Dakota.

While I applaud VA's efforts to reach underserved populations, I am concerned that NCA is not working closely enough with local veterans' communities to determine new locations for rural initiatives.

For example, has the VA asked the Nevada and Idaho veteran community if they agree that the rural initiatives should be in Elko and Twin Falls? I am hopeful that NCA will engage our local veterans with regards to the placement of these shrines, especially in western states that have been overlooked for too long by the NCA.

It is also very concerning that NCA surveys only the families of veterans who have chosen to utilize a national cemetery, while ignoring those who chose a different option as a final resting place. This skews the results of any so called poll. If the NCA hopes to offer options that serve all veterans and their families, this self-selecting survey fails to provide honest feedback.

I hope to hear an update from NCA on any plans they may have to better address our western veterans' lack of an option to be buried in a National Cemetery. Let us remember all of these veterans and servicemembers served our nation. As such, with over 130 national cemeteries, it is time to open a national cemetery to the 1.8 million veterans who do not have this option.

I yield back.